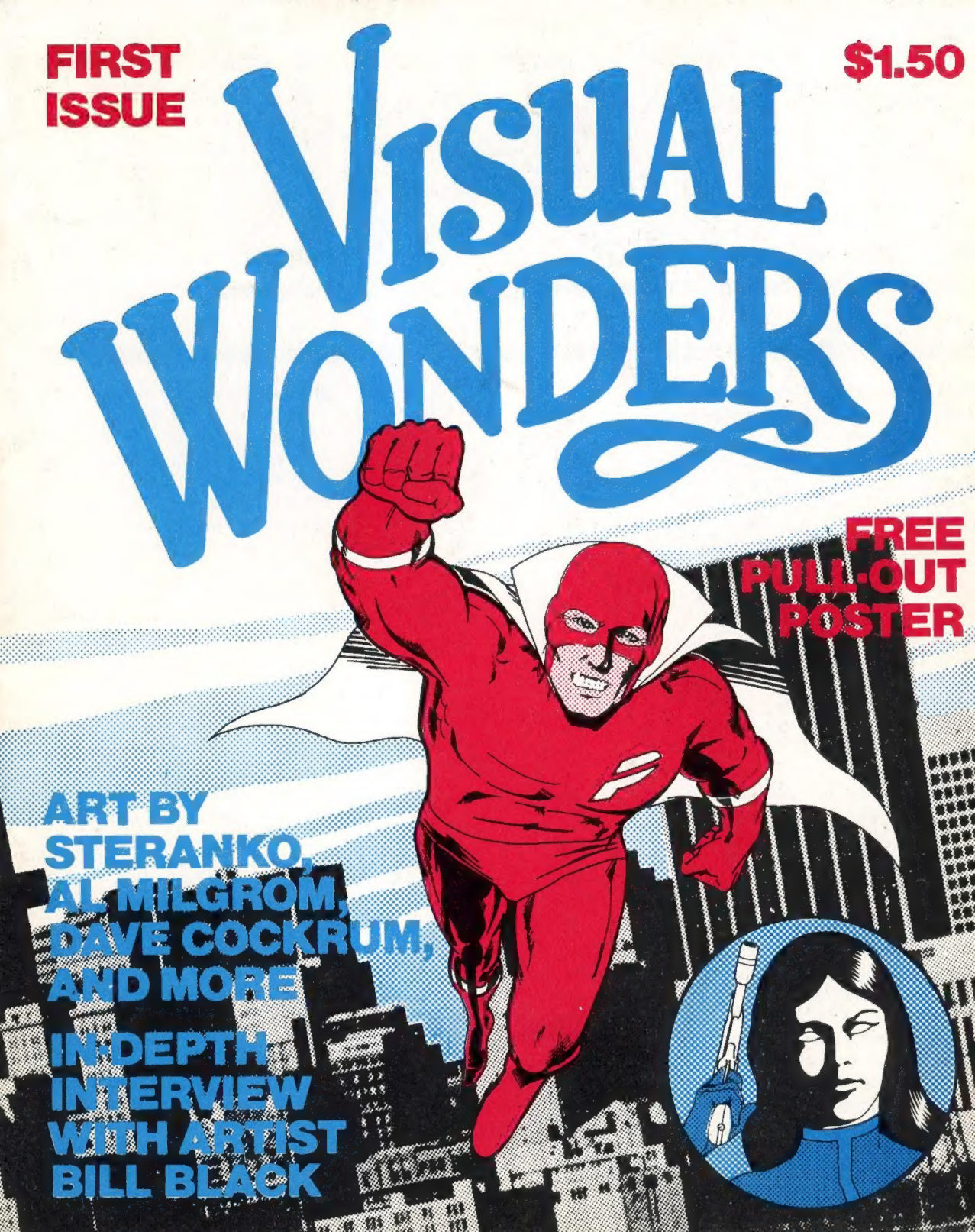
FIRST ISSUE

$1.50

VISUAL WONDERS



FREE PULL-OUT POSTER

ART BY STERANKO, AL MILGROM, DAVE COCKRUM, AND MORE

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST BILL BLACK

THIS TIME Editorial

VOL. 1, NO. 1 WINTER, 1978

Greetings, dear reader, and welcome to VISUAL WONDERS #1. This issue marks the return of VW Studios to the publishing game after an absence of two years, and we've assembled a lot of terrific material for our comeback.

Art Director Steve Vance has been hard at work to provide us with unique and exciting graphics, from layout to logo. Steve also handled most of the editing chores, with help from Associate Editor Bill Whitcomb.

The first name in the credits of our lead strip should be a familiar one. Al Milgrom has worked as editor, writer, penciller, and/or inker for Marvel, DC, and Warren. Al wrote and illustrated this strip several years ago, before turning pro. We decided to alter the character concept somewhat, and Bill rewrote the script, following the original plot. Then, working from Al's breakdowns, Steve re-inked the strip to match our format. A sample of the original is shown here, along with our final version.

The name of Bill Black is also familiar to many fans. Bill is perhaps best known as the producer of Paragon Publications, one of the most successful fanzine lines around. But you'll find that there's a lot more to Bill than Paragon when you read our in-depth interview with him in this issue.

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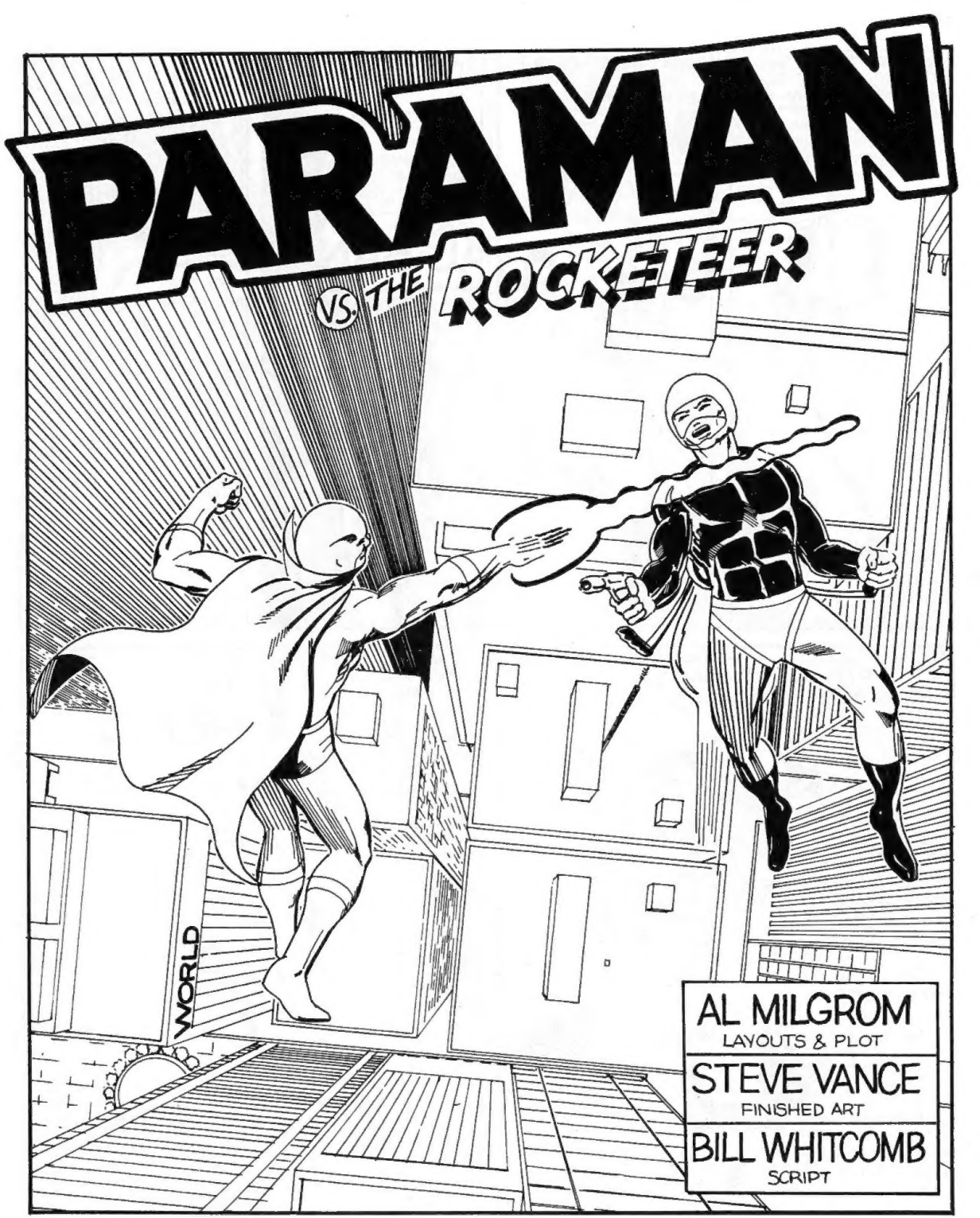
London-based artist Gillies MacKinnon makes his first appearance stateside with an evocative two-page strip entitled "Ai-Uchi." "It means 'mutual slaughter,'" explained Gillies, who practices Kendo as well as depicting it. We think you'll like his meticulous and highly original style.

Dave Cockrum, one of the top artists in comics today, did our dazzling pull-out poster, which, in turn, served as inspiration for Steve and Bill's six-pager, "Azrael." This one's just a teaser; we'll give you more background info on this unusual lady next issue.

Finally, for our back cover, we were extremely fortunate to get a piece by a man who truly needs no introduction—the ever-incredible Steranko.

Enough of this. Look and enjoy!

Gary


PARAMAN
VS. THE ROCKETEER
WORLD
AL MILGROM
LAYOUTS & PLOT
STEVE VANCE
FINISHED ART
BILL WHITCOMB
SCRIPT

UNDAUNTED BY THE SMOG, A STRANGE FIGURE FLIES THE SKIES OF NEW YORK CITY...
LOOK! MUST BE A COMMERCIAL..OR SOMETHING.
OH WOW, MAN!
THIS HAS TO BE A ROBBERY.
YOU WANNA CALL THE COPS?
AL BAN
HELP! POLICE!! WE'VE BEEN ROBBED!
HEY, TOSS ME SOME, MAN!
NOW I WILL CALL THE COPS!

THE NEXT MORNING, IN THE APARTMENT OF BILL SCHWARTZ, ALIAS PARAMAN...
"ROCKETEER ROBS BANK, POLICE BAFFLED"
DAILY SPUD
GUILTY!!
VW STUDIOS PAIR GETS $2 MILL FINE FOR BACK TAXES
WHATEVER HAPPENED TO SCORPIO
JAGGER WEDS WRITER
PRE-PAID SALE!
JEEZ! THAT HAS TO BE THE MOST RIDICULOUS HEADLINE I'VE EVER READ.
MOMENTS LATER, AFTER A QUICK COSTUME CHANGE, PARAMAN TAKES TO THE AIR...
WELL, IT DOES BEAT CHASING MUGGERS. I MIGHT AS WELL GO DOWN TO THE POLICE STATION AND TELL THEM I'M AVAILABLE.
BUY DARK PHANTASMS

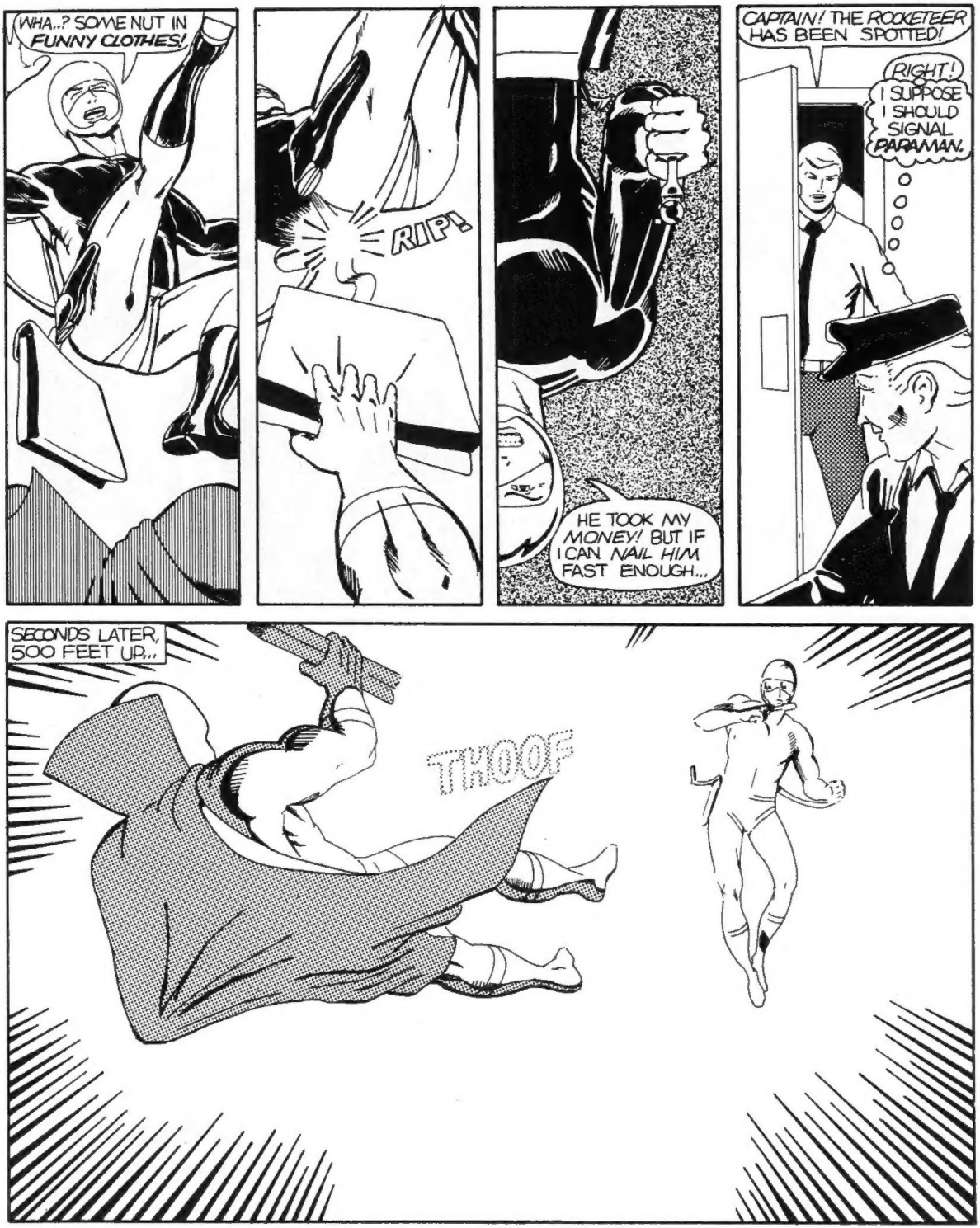
...SO I'D LIKE A CRACK AT THIS ROCKET-MAN NEXT TIME SOMEBODY SPOTS HIM.
SURE, TERRA-MAN.. BUT HOW DO WE GET IN TOUCH WITH YOU?
WANTED
WANTED
WANTED
WANTED

THAT'S PARAMAN! CAN'T YOU SEE THIS P ON MY CHEST? ANYWAY, WHY DON'T WE INSTALL A SECRET HOT-LINE? THAT WAY, WE COULD..,
HOW ABOUT IF WE JUST FIRE A FLARE OVER HEADQUARTERS? I'LL GO AHEAD AND GIVE THE ORDER.

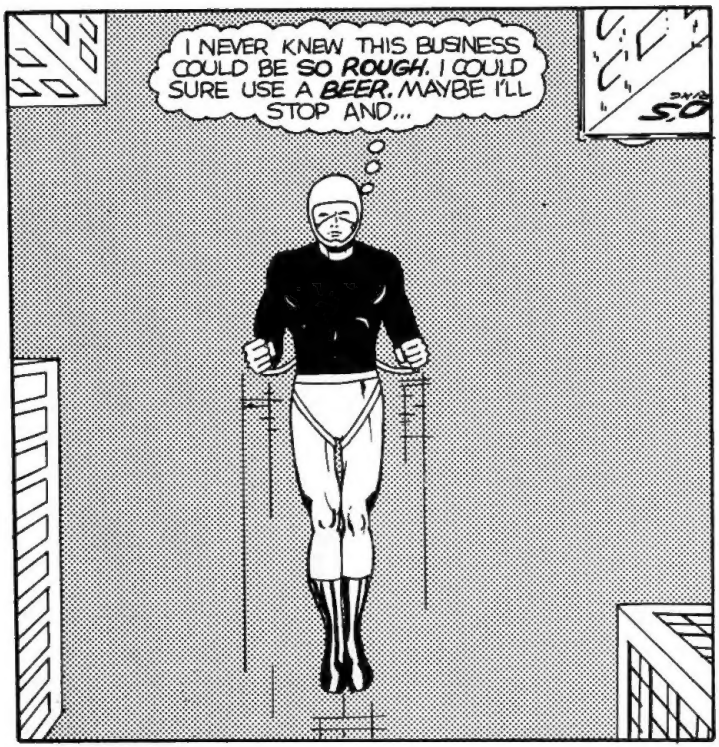
AND INCIDENTALLY, IF YOU EXPECT TO BE COVERED BY THE DEPARTMENTAL INSURANCE POLICY, WE'LL HAVE TO KNOW YOUR SECRET... WHAT TH... WHERE'D HE GO?

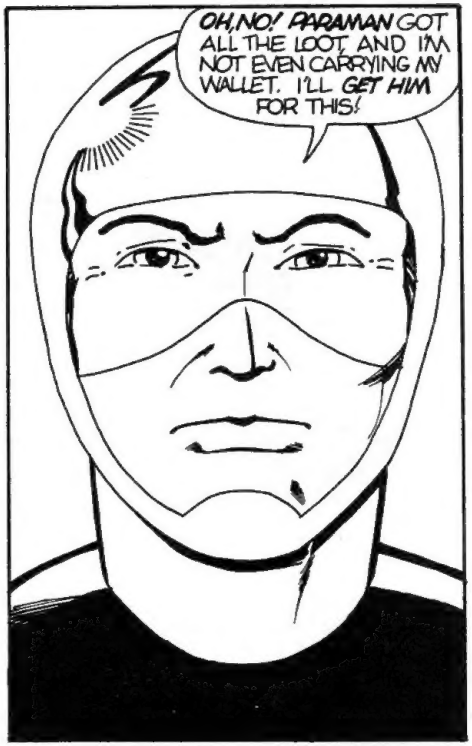
THAT SECRET PHONE WOULD HAVE BEEN CLASSY, BUT I GUESS A FLARE WILL DO. ANYTHING'S BETTER THAN FLYING AROUND LOOKING AT BILLBOARDS ALL THE TIME...

HOWEVER, AS PARAMAN MAKES HIS EIGHTEENTH CIRCUIT OF THE CITY...
THAT MUST BE HIM. OH MAN, HE'S LIKE A REFUGEE FROM A BUCK ROGERS FLICK. AND IT LOOKS LIKE HE'S BEEN BUSY.
TALK ABOUT NERVE! HE'S FLYING RIGHT OVER THE POLICE STATION. WELL, HERE'S WHERE PARAMAN SHOWS HIS STUFF.
KLUD


WHA..? SOME NUT IN FUNNY CLOTHES!
RIP!
HE TOOK MY MONEY! BUT IF I CAN NAIL HIM FAST ENOUGH...
CAPTAIN! THE ROCKETEER HAS BEEN SPOTTED!
RIGHT! I SUPPOSE I SHOULD SIGNAL PARAMAN.
SECONDS LATER, 500 FEET UP...
THOOF

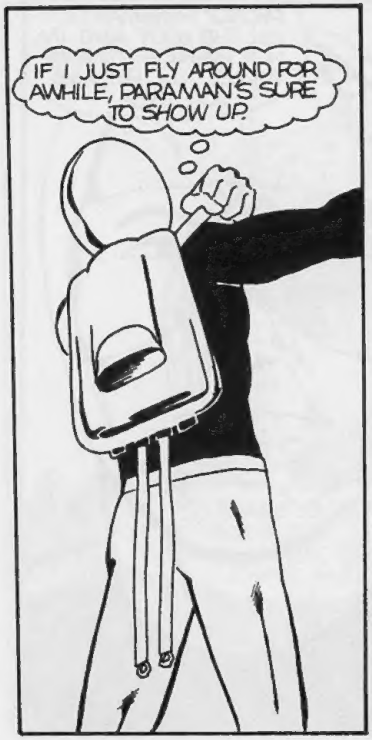
CHRIST! MY EYES! IF HE HAS ANY SENSE, HE'LL PLUG ME WHILE I CAN'T SEE!
THAT STRANGE BOLT! THANK GOD FOR MY GOGGLES! I'D BETTER GET THE HELL OUT BEFORE HE ZAPS ME!
BUT WHEN PARAMAN'S EYES CLEAR
BLAST! HE'S NOWHERE IN SIGHT! BUT AT LEAST I'M STILL IN ONE PIECE!
WELL, NOW THAT I'VE CAUGHT HIS ACT, I WON'T BE SO UNPREPARED NEXT TIME WE MEET. THEN WE'LL SEE WHAT PARAMAN CAN DO--
--IN SPADES!
THIS HERO BIT MUST BE GETTING TO ME. I DON'T BELIEVE I SAID THAT!


I NEVER KNEW THIS BUSINESS COULD BE SO ROUGH. I COULD SURE USE A BEER. MAYBE I'LL STOP AND...


OH, NO! PARAMAN GOT ALL THE LOOT AND I'M NOT EVEN CARRYING MY WALLET. I'LL GET HIM FOR THIS!

SOME TIME PASSES, AND AFTER SEVERAL UNSUCESSFUL ROBBERY ATTEMPTS, THE ROCKETEER DECIDES WHAT MUST BE DONE...
AS LONG AS PARAMAN'S AROUND, I CAN NEVER BE SURE OF PULLING A JOB WITHOUT INTERFERENCE.

IF I'M GOING TO RISE IN MY CHOSEN PROFESSION, THEN ALL OBSTACLES MUST BE ELIMINATED, NO MATTER WHAT IT TAKES!


IF I JUST FLY AROUND FOR AWHILE, PARAMAN'S SURE TO SHOW UP.

AND SOON, TERROR SPREADS THRU THE STREETS...
LOOK! THE UFOS HAVE LANDED!
WHERE?
SOMEBODY CALL THE AIR FORCE!
DON'T WORRY! WHOD WANNA INVADE NEW YORK?

QUICKLY, THE POLICE ARE NOTIFIED...
WELL, I HATE TO COME ON LIKE A COMMISSIONER GORDON, BUT WE DON'T HAVE MANY SQUAD CARS AT THAT ALTITUDE. SO...

ON PATROL, PARAMAN SPOTS THE SIGNAL...
GAK! IT LOOKS LIKE I'LL GET ANOTHER CRACK AT THAT SCI-FI SCUMBAG SOONER THAN I THOUGHT!

I'D BETTER SEE WHAT THE CAPTAIN CAN TELL ME.

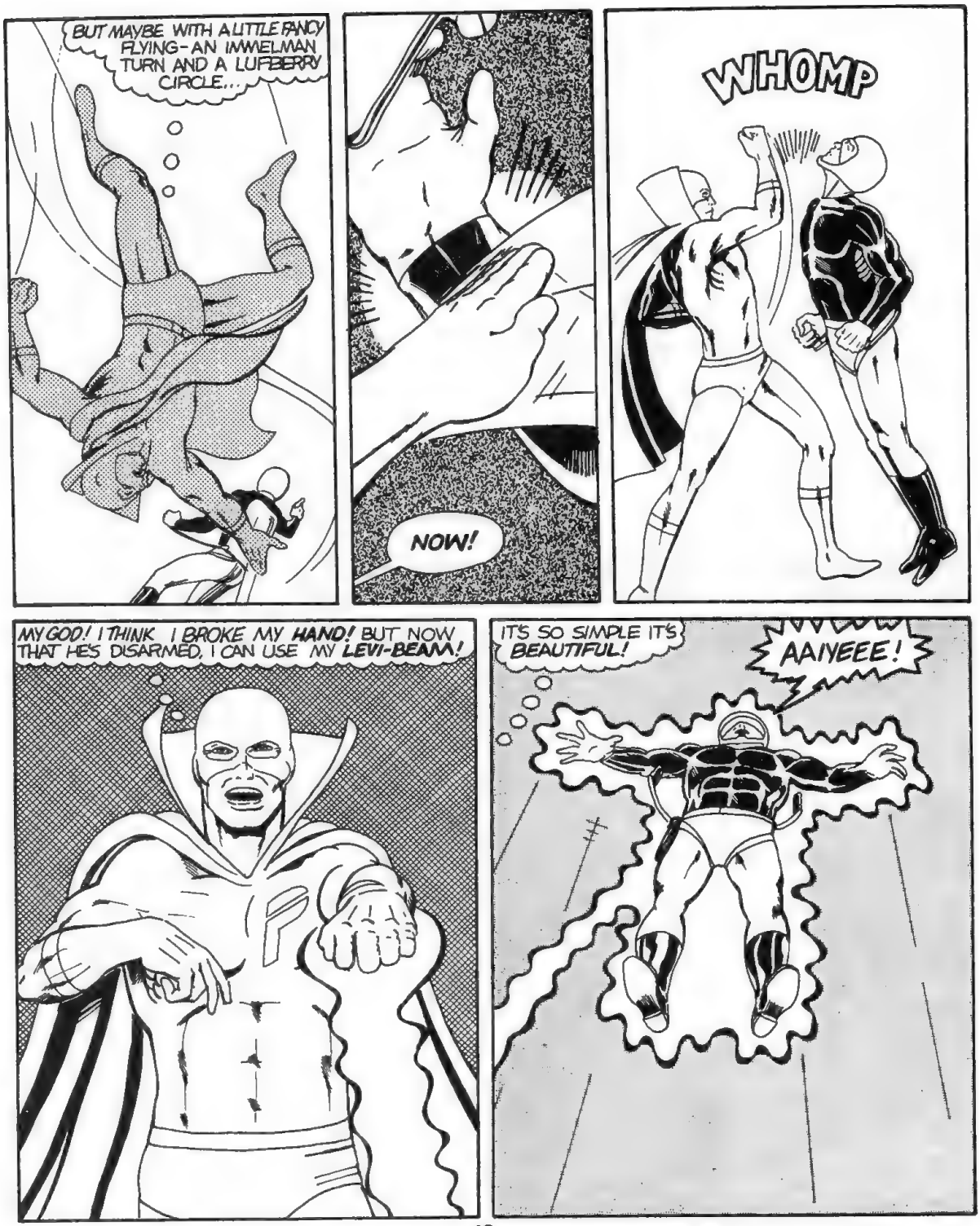
I SAW THE FLARE. WHERE'S THE ROCKETEER?
NORTHWEST OF HERE, MOVING ALONG FLOCKER STREET.
GREAT! BUT ONE MORE THING...
YES?
DON'T FIRE ANY MORE FLARES.

A MERE STREAK ABOVE THE SKYLINE, PARAMAN RUSHES TO THE SCENE--
UP, UP, AND AWAY!

--AND GAINS THE ADVANTAGE OF SURPRISE--

--FOR A MOMENT.

DAMN! THIS ISN'T GOING TO WORK! WITH BOTH OF US IN THE AIR, HE'S STILL GOT THE EDGE. IF I USE MY PARABEAM ON HIM, IT'D KILL HIM. AND AT THE SPEED WE'RE MOVING, I CAN'T HIT JUST HIS GUN.


BUT MAYBE WITH A LITTLE FANCY FLYING - AN IMMELMAN TURN AND A LUFBERRY CIRCLE...
NOW!
WHOMP
MY GOD! I THINK I BROKE MY HAND! BUT NOW THAT HE'S DISARMED, I CAN USE MY LEVI-BEAM!
IT'S SO SIMPLE IT'S BEAUTIFUL!
AAIYEEE!

WHEN HE GET'S HIGH ENOUGH HE'LL PASS OUT--AS HE SEEMS TO BE DOING--
"--NOW! HEE, HEE!"
"ENABLING ME TO BRING HIM DOWN INTO--WHOOPS! LOW-FLYING AIRCRAFT--THE WAITING ARMS OF THE LAW!"
GOOD LORD! =CHOKE=
LATER, WHEN THE ROCKETEER RECOVERS...
I'LL GET YOU FOR THIS, PARAMAN! I'VE GOT SOMETHING IN STORE FOR YOU SO MENACING, SO HORRIBLE, SO DESPICABLE, I...I CAN'T EVEN SAY IT!
I'LL WORRY ABOUT THAT WHEN THE OCCASION ARISES. THEN WE SHALL SEE.
GOTTA FIND A DOCTOR FOR MY HAND!
POLICE
THE END!

CONVERSATION WITH BILL BLACK

When Bill Black was a small child, his parents bought him his first comic book, an issue of Superman. "I don't think I liked it very much," he recalls. However, he quickly developed a taste for the medium which has led him to try his hand at many fascinating (and often expensive) endeavors, from publishing to filmmaking. He worked as an artist for Warren Publishing in the late '60s, and is currently doing some inking work for Marvel. Under the Paragon Publications banner, Bill has produced 13 different titles in ten years, making him one of the largest and best-known publishers in fandom. He has worked as a commercial artist for many years, and is currently employed illustrating audio-visual training programs.

* * *

VW: You started collecting comics fairly early. Was that what got you interested in art? Did you dream of growing up to be a cartoonist?

BB: It was a little more basic than that. What you are refering to is a young lady by the name of Karen Love, who, in the second grade, drew fantastic horses. We really didn't care whether she drew horses or not. She was a rather beautiful little girl, as I remember, and everybody was really infatuated with her. In order to get in on her good side, a lot of us started to try to draw. The results were really horrendous. This was around 1950, I guess. It wasn't until later, when I'd moved to Florida, that I seriously got into drawing comic books. This would be about 1955. My first title was Startling Comics, which I swiped from an old Nedor book. For my characters, I took one of my favorite serial characters, The Black Commando, from a World War II serial that was being re-released at that time. I invented another guy named Blue Eagle, and also did a revival of Airwave, the character from Detective Comics. I think that my early comic book drawing came from the fact that I wanted to recreate the comics I had known

as a kid that no longer existed.

VW: Well, what sort of a concept did you have of what you were doing?

BB: I never stopped to analyze this. I knew I liked comics. I guess I wanted to be like the comics, and to bring back the characters that weren't there. You've got to understand what a marvelous time the '40s were compared to today. There was almost no way to escape adventure stuff back in the '40s, because you had it on the radio. And unlike television now, where you have only three networks with mostly hour-long shows, on the radio you had at least four different networks, and most of the shows were half-hour, and a lot were 15 minutes. They started programs that interested kids in the afternoon, and would go until about ten o'clock. You could conceivably listen to ten interesting shows a day. Plus, television was just coming in at this time. We didn't have a TV set, but I knew which shows I wanted to watch, so I would go over to different neighbors' and relatives' houses. And they'd say, "Here comes little Billy to watch 'Range Rider.'" Unbeknownst to them, I had just come from someone else's house watching "Wild Bill Hickok." I had it all lined up. I guess I got into it all through radio. You had the Lone Ranger, Superman, Tom Corbett, everything. The Shadow was real big, and so were detectives like Richard Palmer and Sam Spade. And they were still running the serials. Comics had 52 pages and cost a dime. it amazes me. I know I never had more than 25 or 50 cents a week. It's amazing how much of this stuff I accomplished on so little money. Movies cost about 14¢. It was a pretty good time. In the '50s, there was an almost complete decline of the superhero, and I greatly cherished the few superhero books that did come out. I copied a lot of Simon and Kirby stuff and changed it into my characters, but I knew nothing about the comics and how they worked. I never gave it much thought. Everybody just said, "Quit drawing and come to supper," that sort of thing.

"I think that my early comic book drawing came from the fact that I wanted to recreate the comics I had known as a kid."

VW: At what point did you begin to consider the idea of doing comics as a serious goal?

BB: I worked on the school paper in high school. I was art editor and did cartoons. I did a lot of campaign posters for people who were running for office, and I would swipe Wally Wood's characters out of Mad comics, like his Superman and Batman take-offs. That was the first time that people said they really liked what I was doing, even though it was only a copy, so that was, I suppose, the first audience awareness I had. In my art classes, I tried to do a lot of science fiction art, like in the pulps. My instructor said that she had gone to Florida State, and that if I was thinking of going into art, I should look into Fla. State. Boy, was that silly. I got no help whatsoever at FSU in the way of commercial art, but while I was there, I worked with a fellow named Bill Colleen, who published a college humor magazine called The Charlatan. This sort of thing was really big in the '60s. I worked for him as his associate editor, and I did ads. Gilbert Shelton was a buddy of Colleen's and he did Wonder Wart-hog for the book. Shelton and Colleen came out of the University of Texas, in Austin, and worked on the Texas Ranger and created Wonder Wart-hog there. Colleen got kicked out of the state or something and wound up in Tallahassee, publishing The Charlatan. I got in with him when I met him at the stands, and that was the first time I had my work published. I did a couple of Wart-hog things, not strips, but covers and ads with the wart-hog in them. I liked that kind of stuff. I patterned most of my work after what Bill Elder had been doing in Help magazine.

VW: When did you first try to get pro comics work?

BB: I think it was in '65

that I first sent some stuff to the comic book companies. It wasn't until the first Spiderman annual came out, with a piece by Ditko in the back on how he drew Spiderman, that I learned that they used a brush to ink comics. After I read that, I did some samples and sent them into Marvel Comics. Sol Brodsky was the production manager at the time, and fabulous Flo Steinberg was the secretary, and they were both very helpful and encouraging. They wrote me back and said, "Take your time and do us a sample page. We'll pay you money." So I took my time and did a sample page and they paid me the money, and that was about it. Compared with what I do now I can see why they didn't do too much more about it. I have nothing but good things to say about Marvel. They treated me very well, they were very cooperative, and gave me every consideration. I would say I just didn't measure up.

The next thing I did was to send a story in to Archie Goodwin at Creepy. I had no idea what size to make the stuff, so I remember doing it 8½ x 11, which is the actual size of the magazine. A month or so passed, and I got it returned with a very nice letter from Archie explaining what size the art should be and how things are done. He gave me a lot of good criticism. He'd say "Al Williamson does this, " or "Wally Wood does that." He rejected my work, of course, but he was very helpful. It gave me a little better direction.

Immediately upon receiving the story back, I sent it off to Weird, the reprint horrible schlock publication, criticizing the terrible art that they had, and saying, "Hey, why don't you try this?" Not only did I never get a reply, but I never got the art back, either. It was probably no great loss.

VW: That'll teach you not to criticize Weird. But of course you eventually did go to work for Warren. Did that follow this series of correspondence?

BB: No, that was a couple years later. It was through Bill Parente. Archie left and all the good artists left and Warren was in a slump. Years later, talking to Bill Parente in New York, I learned that Warren had gotten all these good artists like Wood and Ditko and Williamson for something like what they were paying me later on, which was $35 a page. And that was the whole ball of wax, except for the lettering. And more than just pencils and inks; these things were usually ink wash drawings. Warren had made some sort of promise that they would receive more money after the books got rolling. Well, the books got rolling, but the money didn't, so there was a mass exit. Archie and Al and everybody left at one time, and that opened the doors to a lot of mediocre artists. This was while I was in the army.

VW: When were you in the army, by the way?

BB: Whenever I got drafted. I went in in April of '67 and got out in April of '69. I had an interesting career in the army. I was in Training Aids as an artist, and this is where I contacted Parente and did a lot of work. I could go in and use the drawing boards at night. I was slated to go to Germany in '68, and I didn't want to go to Germany, because I was supposed to be getting married, and I couldn't get marif I was in Germany. So I had this friend who worked at headquarters, and he dropped my files down the back of the filing cabinet, and without any records, I couldn't be transferred. The people at Special Services on the base had been after me for a long time to go to work for them, but I couldn't get released from Training Aids. So we had this little scheme worked out in which I was going to Germany. I got my clearance papers and I signed out of Training Aids, walked right over to the sergeant in Special Services, and he signed me in. From that day, my army career changed completely. I became an instructor at the base crafts shop, I didn't have to report to work 'til noon, I wore no uniform, I got married and brought my wife in as a secretary at the crafts shop, and I had my own painting studio. They set me up so that I could enter my paintings in art shows. The army had this big program going and they wanted somebody who could paint to enter in these contests. We were located near Savannah, Georgia, which was a real art city. The river is lined with artist's ghettoes. So while I was on my honeymoon, a guy I worked with at the crafts shop took a bunch of my work and entered it in one of the civilian shows in Savannah. The competition was from local artists and from the colleges and universities around there. When I got back, he presented me with the best-in-show ribbon, along with a couple of other prizes. So that was one of my goals in life achieved, and I've almost never painted since that day.

VW: How did your work for Warren start? By faking a transfer to Rangoon?

BB: I did a story and sent it to Parente, and he sent it back with a big hole slashed out of the splash page, which, in this case, was the last page of the story. I was rather livid at this. He printed that part of the splash page on the Creepy letters page, or something like that. I later submitted a drawing of a character I had invented, and this is what led to my working for Warren. He called me up and said "You must have been reading our minds. This character that you drew is exactly the same as the one Forry Ackerman just came up with, and we're doing a new book featuring this character." And I said, "Yeah? What are you talking about?" He said, "We came up with this female vampire from the planet Draculon, and she's going to be called

AZRAEL

Vampirella." So quite unbeknownst to myself, I had done a drawing that remarkably resembled the drawing that Vampirella was based on. They had some hack guy do the actual drawing. Fritz Frazinga or something. He broke her leg in two places and they put it on the cover of Vampirella number one. They ran the drawing I did full page in Creepy, and I also did a piece for Forry of Vincent Price and Peter Lorre in Comedy of Terrors that ran in Famous Monsters. Then Parente started sending me scripts. The way it worked at Warren was that they would send you the complete script, and you would do the pencils and then send them to New York, and they would have Ben Oda letter it and send it back to be inked. I would have about a month to do a six or seven page story, which is a long time compared with today, but back then it seemed to take a long time to do it. After a while, I went ahead and inked one of the stories, leaving the blank balloons. I figured this would save time. Unfortunately, either the letterer omitted a balloon, or they decided to strike a balloon, so in this story there's a balloon and ain't nobody sayin' nothin'.

VW: Who else was working for Warren while you were there?

BB: Well, like I said, there were some rather mediocre artists there, like Dick Piscopo, or whatever his name is. I couldn't imagine how he ever got any work. He must have been Warren's brother-in-law. Then I decided that Tony Talerico must have been his brother-in-law, because his work was in every book.

VW: Warren had a lot of sisters, huh?

BB: He must have. So I was working with these stellar personalities.

VW: No doubt picking up a lot of helpful hints.

BB: Well, Mike Royer was working there, too. His work was sort of stiff, but his inking style was just fantastic. He was just a super slick inker, and he and I became good friends. Ernie Colon was working there, and he did some good stuff. A fellow by the name of Neal Adams came around, and he did some nice work. I always have this sob story about why I never got much recognition with my Warren stuff. The fact that I did very mediocre work is the real reason. But despite all the poor artwork that was being done for Warren then, he always seemed to come up with something really terrific to go in the issues that my work was in. Like the first book I appeared in, which had the first cover painting ever done by Steranko. It'll be a collector's item some day, but not because of me. The next issue's letters page just talked about this fantastic cover, and there was no mention of my story. The last story I did for Warren had real triple-threat competition. Not only did that issue have a Frank Frazetta cover, but the lead story was written by Harlan Ellison (and there's another story behind that, but I won't mention it, because I don't like to be sued), and illustrated by Neal Adams. This strip immediately preceded my story, so nobody even noticed that mine was in the book. The story was written by Bill Warren, who was a good writer, and no relation to Jim Warren. He had a short career at Warren, too, and out of all the scripts I got, his was the only decent one. It's a funny thing that one of the scripts I did was written by Don Glut, and I seem to be doing nothing but Don Glut stories for Marvel now.

VW: Did you ever do any more Vampirella-type stuff after that first drawing?

BB: The stuff I did for Warren actually had no girl art in it at all, so I did a strip which was more Vampirella-ish, and just submitted it on my own, and never heard from them or got the story back or anything. When I told Mike Royer this at the New York comics con, he said, "You'd better not leave this city without it," but I had read a lot of things about what happens to people when they go into Warren's office, so I figured I'd just stay at the convention. The thing that terminated my work there was a note that Warren, while off in Europe, sent to his right-hand man in New York, Richard somebody, who sent it on to me. It said, "Please inform artist Bill Black that I am VERY unhappy with his most recent story because he consistently draws large HEADS instead of good, solid artwork with backgrounds. This is a cheap trick used by lazy artists." This really pissed me off, because this story was unlike most of the stories done by Warren Publishing at that time. It was actually a sensitive, well-written, moving story. It was about a vampire who really detested being a vampire and having to take blood. He meets a young lady who is not what you'd call an incredible beauty, and she leads a rather lonely life too, and they fall in love. It was a love story, not a blood and gore story at all, and, being a love story, it required the portrayal of emotions, which to me means doing facial close-ups, since that's where a person shows emotion. If it had been an action story where he was kicking the girl's teeth out, a long shot would have been appropriate. The thing that really galled me was that that was the best story I did. It had what I thought were some pretty nice graphic horror scenes at the beginning, where he's biting people's necks and the like. There was a lot of stuff in there that I was not particularly proud of, that I didn't handle very well, but by and large it was the best story I did. This, to me, demanded a response, so I wrote a fiery letter back and I never received any more scripts. But here's an example of a panel from the story, and I

don't think this had been done before. I had a very graphic close-up of the guy's teeth going into the victim's neck, with the blood coming out, and it was viewed from kind of an interesting angle. Of course, since then Warren has shown absolutely no taste at all. They disembowel babies and show all kinds of gross stuff, so I guess it's just as well that I'm no longer affiliated with that outfit.

VW: When did you make your first contact with fandom?

BB: I've never had any contact with fandom.

VW: All right, now!

BB: I knew nothing about fandom at all until the late sixties. I think that the first thing I did was to order some old Captain Marvels from Howard Rogofsky while I was still in the army. I got maybe five or six of these and was just blown away. Wow! The same comics I had when I was a little kid and all that. The guys I worked with in the army were civilians with the same sort of art background as I had, and we had a lot of money to play around with; so my friend said, "What do you think we should buy next?" I said, "We could go into silkscreening, since I've never done any of that, or maybe we could get an offset press." So we bought an offset press and all kinds of paper and ink, and I published a little book called Paragon Golden-Age Greats, which I still have a few copies of. Now, I've told you that I'd gotten these Captain Marvel comics and was really turned on, so I decided to do my own version of Captain Marvel as maybe Marvel Comics would do him. I did this strip about the return of Captain Marvel and we printed it on this little press, and we also reprinted a story from Captain Marvel #94. I had all these things printed up just before I left the army. When I got down to Winter Park, I got a copy of the RBCC. The RBCC of that time in no way resembles what's being published today. It was really scabby back then. It had no editorial direction, no layout, no nothing; just page after page of garbage ads. I looked through it and decided that there were only five people with ads in the magazine who looked like they knew what they were doing, and I got in touch with these people, one of whom was Marty Greim. Now Marty is very paranoid about lawsuits, and he cautioned me that I should never put this book out, because I would get my backside sued off by DC if I did. So I wrote a letter to DC Comics, asking permission to do this book. Of course, at that time Marvel Comics had started doing their version of CM. I got a letter back from Carmine

"The coming of Paragon set new standards for fanzines."

Infantino's secretary saying that I had written the wrong company and that they did not have anything to do with the character Captain Marvel. I wrote them back and explained how they did have something to do with the character and got the same kind of reply, so I just decided not to release the book. I, of course, had no money in it. The government had subsidized the whole project. So what I did was to redraw the strip. I whited out the lightning bolt on CM's chest and changed the costume somewhat, and Captain Paragon was born. The strip was eventually published in something called Paragon Presents #1, which was my second publication. The first book I did was Paragon Illustrated, in which, proving that I can turn anything into a story, I used Marty Greim's information on how DC Comics put Captain Marvel out of business and did an article on the Captain Marvel controversy. The first issue was not what you would call an instant sell-out. In fact, I probably still have some around. But the first two issues of Paragon established sort of a new trend for fanzines. Bill Spicer was doing Graphic Story Magazine, and you had Spa Fon and Squa Tront and Bill Pearson's Witzend, which were all super magazines, but almost everything else was garbage. Marty Greim was consistently improving his book, Comic Crusader, and so were Bill Wilson and Gary Groth, but I think that in layout and quality of printing the Paragon books set the path. At least this was the contention. At one of the conventions in New York, Marty pointed out that the coming of Paragon set new standards for fanzines in terms of the quality of reproduction, and, God, what a Frankenstein's monster I've created. Now all the damned books cost three and four dollars apiece. Back then, I put out a thirty-six page book entirely on 80-pound stock, which I have not been able to afford since, with a two-color cover on heavier stock, and I sold the thing for 75¢ and was sort of ashamed to ask that much for it. The second issue had more pages, but I dropped the weight and eliminated the color, and even though I put a dollar on the cover, I only sold it for 75¢, 'cause I was afraid that a dollar book just wouldn't sell. That first book cost me about $350, and you couldn't have a book trimmed for that today.

VW: How did you start the girl art?

BB: In The Charlatan, we did a lot of sexy ads. I would jump at any excuse to draw girls. This was a childhood dream, to someday earn a living by drawing beautiful women. Throughout my paint-

ing career, about the only things I did were nudes. I'd get men's magazines and copy the poses, and have these girls selling pizza at Chanelo's or whatever. We did one on the back cover for a sandwich shop using Sheena.
VW: If you didn't have to worry about sales, what sort of books would you produce?
BB: I'd like to do a lot of the western books, but I have absolutely no facility for drawing horses. I'd like to do more western movie magazines, but nobody seems to want to buy them anymore, and with printing costs the way they are, I can't afford to do a book that won't sell. I am probably more proud of that issue I did on Charles Starrett than anything else I've done, but there was no artwork involved in that. It was a writing job. I like the girl art stuff. I'd like to get back into superheroes to see if I can remember how to draw men, but there's probably not a much more pleasurable way to make a living than the girl art books. A lot of people think they're sex books, but I steer strictly clear of any sexual connotations whatsoever. As I always say, you could put Tarzan into a story in place of Tara, and there would be no difference in the story line.
VW: But what about something like Bizarre Thrills, and in particular the story "Blackjack Comics?" Do those have no sexual connotations?
BB: The story on that is that 1976 was a good year, but 1977 was the pits. In '77 I opened myself up to just about anything I could do to raise house payments, and this involved me with some rather seedy characters. There are different art shops around the country that devote themselves to doing artwork on request for people who might not be able to obtain what they want otherwise. This one character wrote me, and I suppose it was through one of these things and not through an ad in The Buyer's Guide, because he had some rather unusual ideas. He had this thing about beautiful girls being sapped, and I'd never come across this before. He wanted me to do a series of drawings of various golden-age heroines being sapped from the back with a blackjack. Now, I guess that's sort of unusual. However, I can remeber vividly that this was a rather common tactic in the '40s and '50s. You couldn't watch any Richard Diamond TV show without seeing Diamond get sapped or clubbed with a gun from behind. I never attached any sexual significance to these goings- on; whether this guy did or not, I don't know, but I will say that I think it's strange. Anyway, I did these drawings, and the guy says, "I'll pay you any price," and he paid me nothing. He couldn't make this payment and he couldn't make that payment, so I told him I'd lower the price, but to this day, he has not sent me a dime. So I had these drawings, and what the hell am I going to do with them? I was going to send them to Clifford Neal's Dr. Wertham's Comics and Stories, but then I thought," Maybe there's a story in this somewhere," and I linked them together and came up with this plot that involved Dr. Wertham, the comics code, Bill Gaines, and the fact that there were a lot of blackjackings in the comics of the '40s. In fact, I even took a drawing from an Everett Sub-Mariner that I had traced out of one of Marty Greim's comics up in Boston, a shot of Betty Dean being blackjacked, and added it to the series.

"You can't give the fans the same thing they can get for 35¢."

Bondage is supposed to have sexual connotations, but when they tied up Roy Rogers, I saw no sexual connotations. There supposedly are when you tie up the Phantom Lady, however. For years, this outfit in New York, Movie Star News, sold glossies of stars, and they had a category for bondage, where they had all these shots from various movies, even Disney movies, I'm sure, of various people tied up. Some people like things in which people are tied up. I don't know. I just saw that there might be a good-selling item here. The book was successful. I will not do another one. Whether we actually crossed a line that we shouldn't have or not, a lot of people think we did. They took it too seriously. I don't see anything that weird about the book. It's kinky, I guess, because it's got bondage and spanking and...is blackjacking a category? I don't know. I'm not putting out a second issue.
VW: Just what are you aiming for with the Paragon material?
BB: With Paragon, you have to figure out what's going to sell, and you have to figure out what your market will stand as far as price goes. You can't give the fans the same thing they can get for 35¢. You have to go a little bit further in terms of an experimental story like the blackjack story. We got some good comments on the story itself. I guess the Phantom Lady in the front of the book would be the real experimental story, a free-form kind of thing that you wouldn't get in a regular comic book. The alternative is to go the underground route, with ex-

plicit graphic depictions. I'm not interested in any sort of pornography at all. In my books, I'd like to hark back to the '40s and '50s. I don't have any intention of ever making this stuff serious. I think seriousness was done to death in the O'Neil-Adams Green Lantern-Green Arrow stories. I'm not selling relevance. I just want to keep the stuff kind of light, tongue-in-cheek. I've instructed other artists and writers to do them in the same vein. Most of the the young artists that are doing work for me have no idea what the girl art books were like in the '40s. I've had to explain it to them. The stories were strictly secondary to the leg art. They'd have the legs of the girls extending into the next panel, or the next couple of panels. What was in the balloons didn't matter all that much. It was just nice artwork.

VW: How did your current work at Marvel start? How does it fit in with the other things you're doing?

BB: In November of '77, Roy Thomas wrote me and posed the question, "Don't you think it's time you did some work for Marvel? I do." At that time, I was in the middle of an audio-visual program, and I didn't even have time to write him for about ten days. I said that in December I would be free to do some work, and he was very open. He or Marvel or both had apparently kept a file on me over the years, and he mentioned a lot of things that I had done that I had just about forgotten. We couldn't get together before, because they kinda wanted everybody to live in New York, and I wasn't going to do that, but since he was in California, and Marvel people are spread out all over the place, we thought that we could work it out. He had seen the Bizarre Thrills ad, and he used to buy Paragon, so he's been aware of my work. I guess they need to break in new people. So he suggested that we try some sample pages and I said fine, and everything since then has worked out. I can do the audio-visual work and the Marvel work, and that's been really nice. I'd rather do the Marvel work, but I can't afford to give up up the a-v things. What I'd like to do would be to ink one book a month, or every two months. I feel like I'm really learning something from it. I have no idea how I fit into the Marvel scheme of things. I'm absolutely low man on the totem pole, and I don't know what's going on. All I know is that I've got something to do when it arrives in the mail.

VW: Do you actually enjoy the physical act of drawing a comic book?

BB: Yeah. I'm really excited about it. I guess I'm doing what I always wanted to do.

VW: Do you enjoy inking other people's pencils for Marvel as much as you enjoy doing your own work?

BB: I enjoy them both. I wish I had more time to make my stuff better, and I think that can happen if we go to more of an assembly line type of thing. I don't usually write scripts when I'm working on the stuff myself, and I think the stories would be much improved if I wrote scripts. I've written two Tara scripts recently that Mark Hempel is working on, and I really enjoyed that. It just takes so long to put out a fanzine. It takes so many hours, and is stretched over months and years before it's finished. Ultimately, the artwork is probably better that way, but you sure lose a lot of your momentum. In some cases, since I don't write a script beforehand, I've come back to a partially completed strip after two or three years and found that I've forgotten what I was drawing about. I'd forget how I was going to finish it. Maybe I never figured out how I was going to finish it in the first place. I find both types of work rewarding. I can learn a lot from the Marvel work, and develop my skills faster, because I have to just sit down and do it, and the more pages you do, the better you get.

VW: You've been working on a film featuring one of your characters, Astron. How's it coming, and what do you think the future of the project might be?

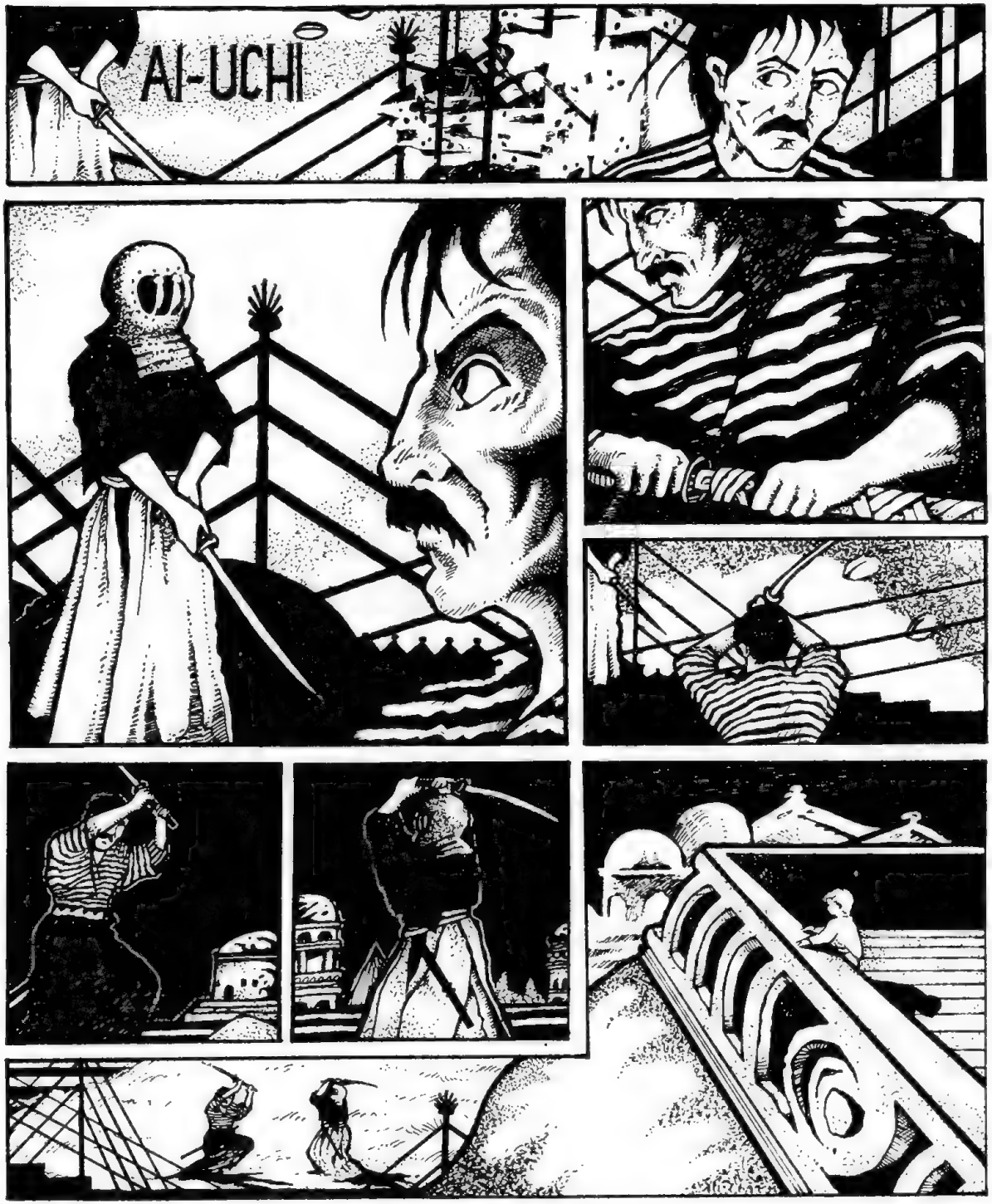
BB: I don't know, and if I don't know, who does? We had a situation where we either had the time to work on the film, but no money, or we'd have money and no time. What I did to do the movie in the first place was to amass several thousand dollars and then quit my job, so that I'd have time to do it. What went wrong was that, while it only took a weekend to shoot the film, no other work came along, and other expenses besides the movie came up that exhausted the money I had to complete it. This was in November of '76, and '77, as I have said, was a terrible year. I went into the audio-visual business, which was sort of a foolhardy thing to do, since Tallahassee isn't exactly the sight and sound capital of the world. I was working long, hard hours to make a buck wherever I could, and had not even a penny for the Astron film. We did primarily effects work, and we're still not quite through with that. After that, I have to mix the sound. It's not so much a matter of money now, but a matter of time. With the Marvel work and the a-v work, it's a complete reversal. Now I have so much work to do that I don't have time for the film, even though I've got the money to complete it. We're building a super-duper animation stand into the studio in the new house in Orlando, and I've gotten in with some filmmakers in the area, Fred Ray and several others, and I think that the conditions will be right for finishing the film once we get down there. I think I'll be compelled to do it.

VW: What are your plans for it once you do get it fin-

ished?
BB: The idea was to use it as a television pilot, to see if the networks would be interested in that type of series. If they're interested, what we'll probably do now is to sell the idea. We had originally hoped to produce the thing ourselves, but being realistic, I don't think that we have the time. I've got ideas for the thing, and would like to see the character proceed in a certain way. I felt that the stuff that was done on television was dull. It teaches a moral, which is good, because I think kids need that, but there are right ways and wrong ways of doing it. When Captain Marvel comes out and says,"Kids, the moral of today's show is blah blah blah," that's the wrong way. Now if you look back at the old Roy Rogers movies, they would have a moral, or something of educational value, but it was worked into the plot. You weren't slapped up the side of the face with this piece of learning, but when you left the theatre, you were excited and had had a good time, but you were also better for it. I wanted Astron to be a hero image. I wanted him to be better than other people, better than what the average person in the '70s is led to believe he needs to be. I wanted him to be something that the kids could try to emulate, like what was done in the '30s, '40s, and '50s with the characters in the westerns and the serials. Admittedly, the things that those people did would be considered insane, if you looked at them from the basis of what a rational person would do, but that's not the point. The point is that these films were teaching children proper moral behavior, what was right and what was wrong. Sure, there are lots of shades of gray, but that leads to maniacs like the ones Clint Eastwood plays. I'm not interested in that type of image. I think that you should have an Errol Flynn type of image that no kid could ever grow up to be, but it's something to set your sights on, regardless of whether or not it's an insane thing to jump off a cliff onto a speeding train in order to save a girl. The point is that the girl needs to be saved. You don't stop to wonder if you're going to break your ankles if you do this; you just do it. I'm a romanticist. I like adventure stories and all that. There was a new Zorro film made a few years ago, and I used my daughter Laura as an excuse to go to the kiddie matinee. The kids just went beserk. They had never seen anything like this. It was done just like the old westerns, with in-

"The point is that the girl needs to be saved."

credible, ridiculous stunts. The guy leaps off the top of a building, bounces off an awning like it was a trampoline, lands on his horse, and takes off. They'd just never seen anybody do anything like that. Clint Eastwood just shoots everybody in his path, steps onto his horse, and rides away, but this was really spectacular. It showed someone who was capable of doing what most people would consider more-than-human stunts, and yet he was just a guy like everybody else. Astron is played by Bill Greenman, who is a circus acrobat and can really do all this stuff. I think that kids can really get excited about it, just like they did in the '30s and '40s. Star Wars certainly proved that, as popular as it is. It's the same sort of thing.
VW: One last question. How is it that, after all these years, you never have really "quit drawing and come to supper?"
BB: When I was a kid, six years old, up in Pennsylvania, I was coming home from a Durango Kid matinee. I was pretending that I was the Durango Kid, you know, shooting the bad guys and all that kind of stuff. I was climbing up an elevated billboard, which was kind of treacherous and dangerous and stupid. It sort of reminded me of the Boston Blackie TV show, which would always end in a fantastic chase scene through an oil refinery, or something where they would be running through these high, trellised areas. I fell off and hit my head. I can remember waking up a few times and seeing these strange little green men leaning over me, and this noise kept pulsating in the back of my head like this (odd pulsating noise), and then it all went into blackness. About a half-hour later, I woke up, and I was the Durango Kid once more, and I got up and returned home with no more than the wind knocked out of me, and ever since then I've had the compulsion to draw comic books. I can't help but feel that there was something to that incident that compels me to do all these insane things that have just caused all sorts of disharmony in my family, and created sleepless nights and physical labor and depletion of my bankroll, purely for the sake of satisfying some inner drive to expand my existence.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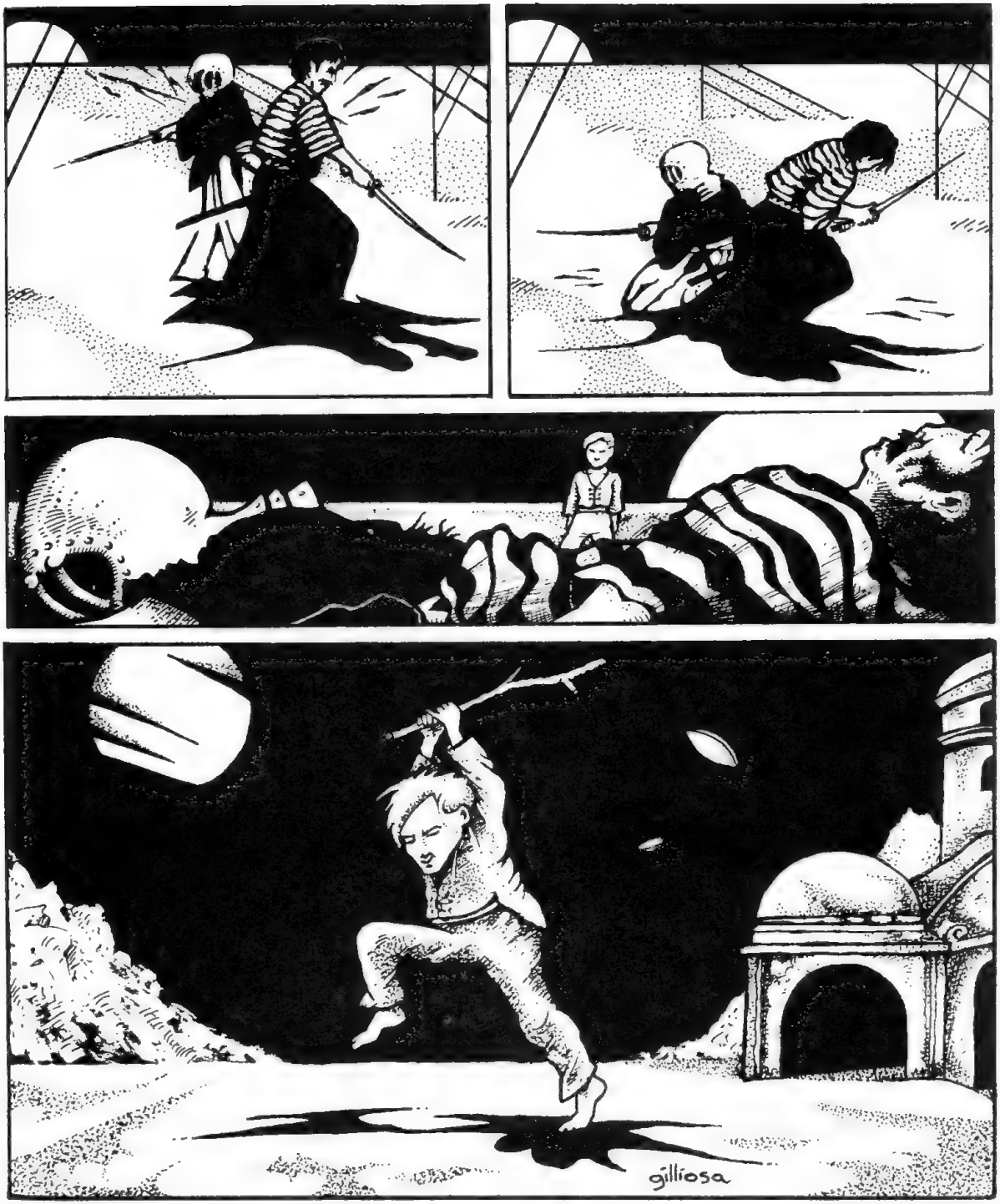
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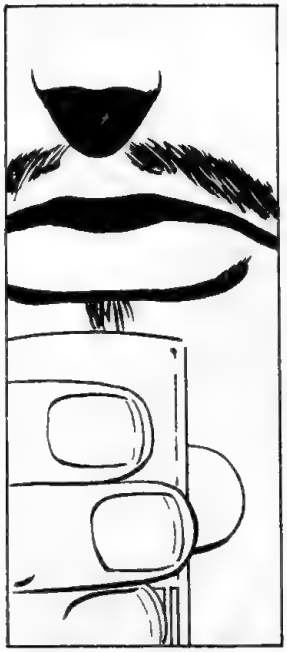

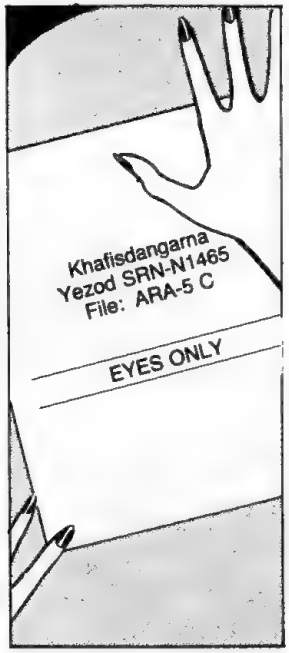
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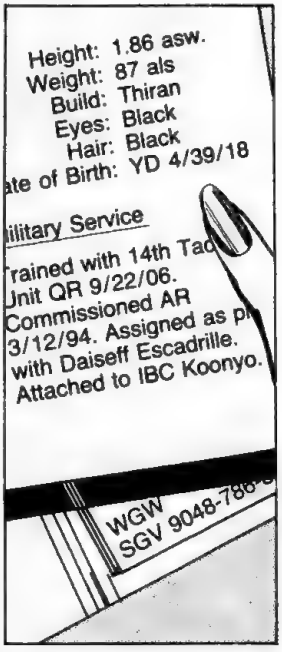
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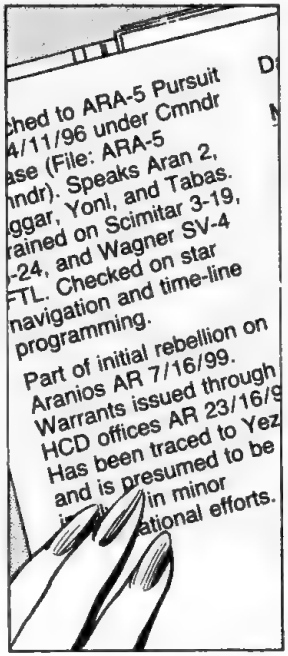
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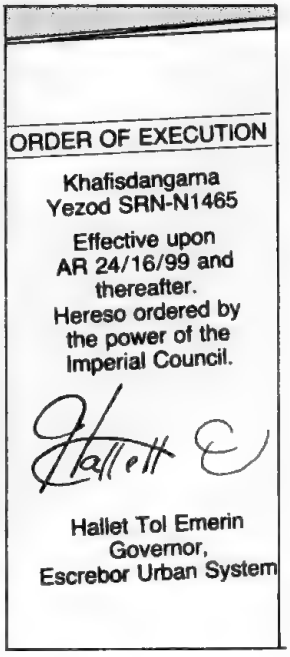
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YEZOD: AN ANACHRONISTIC BACKWATER AMIDST THE STAR-SPANNING ARAN EMPIRE..

A CONFUSION OF CULTURES, THE PLANET SEEMED LIKE A GOOD PLACE TO HIDE— UNTIL THE ARRIVAL OF --

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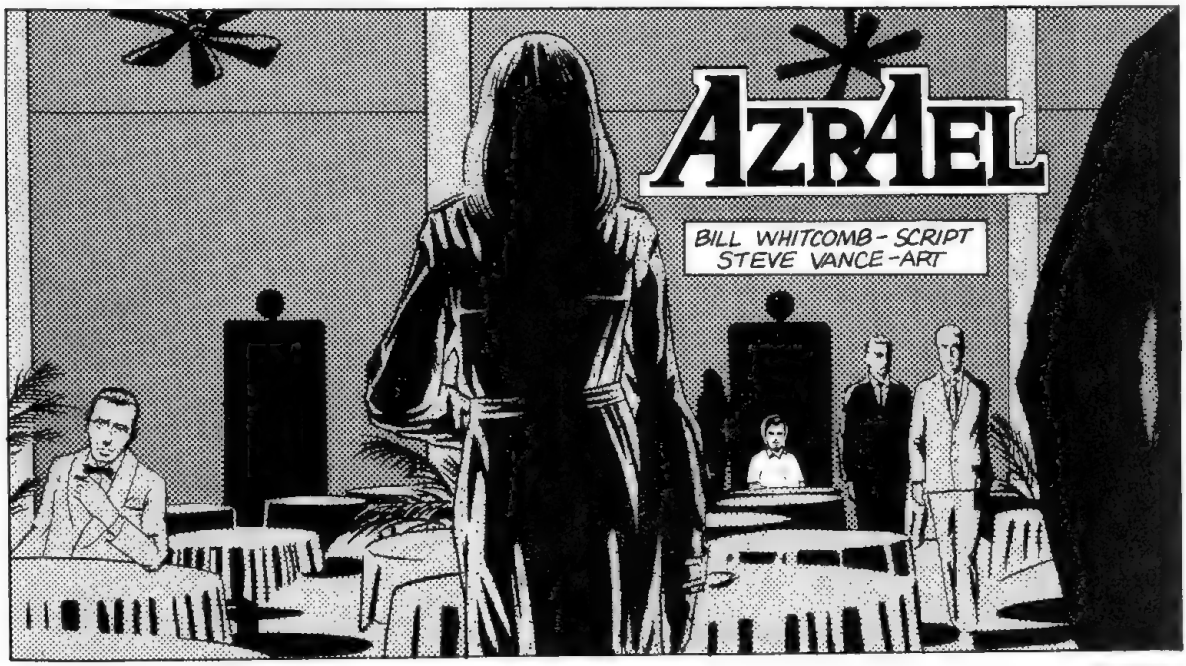
AZRAEL
BILL WHITCOMB - SCRIPT
STEVE VANCE - ART

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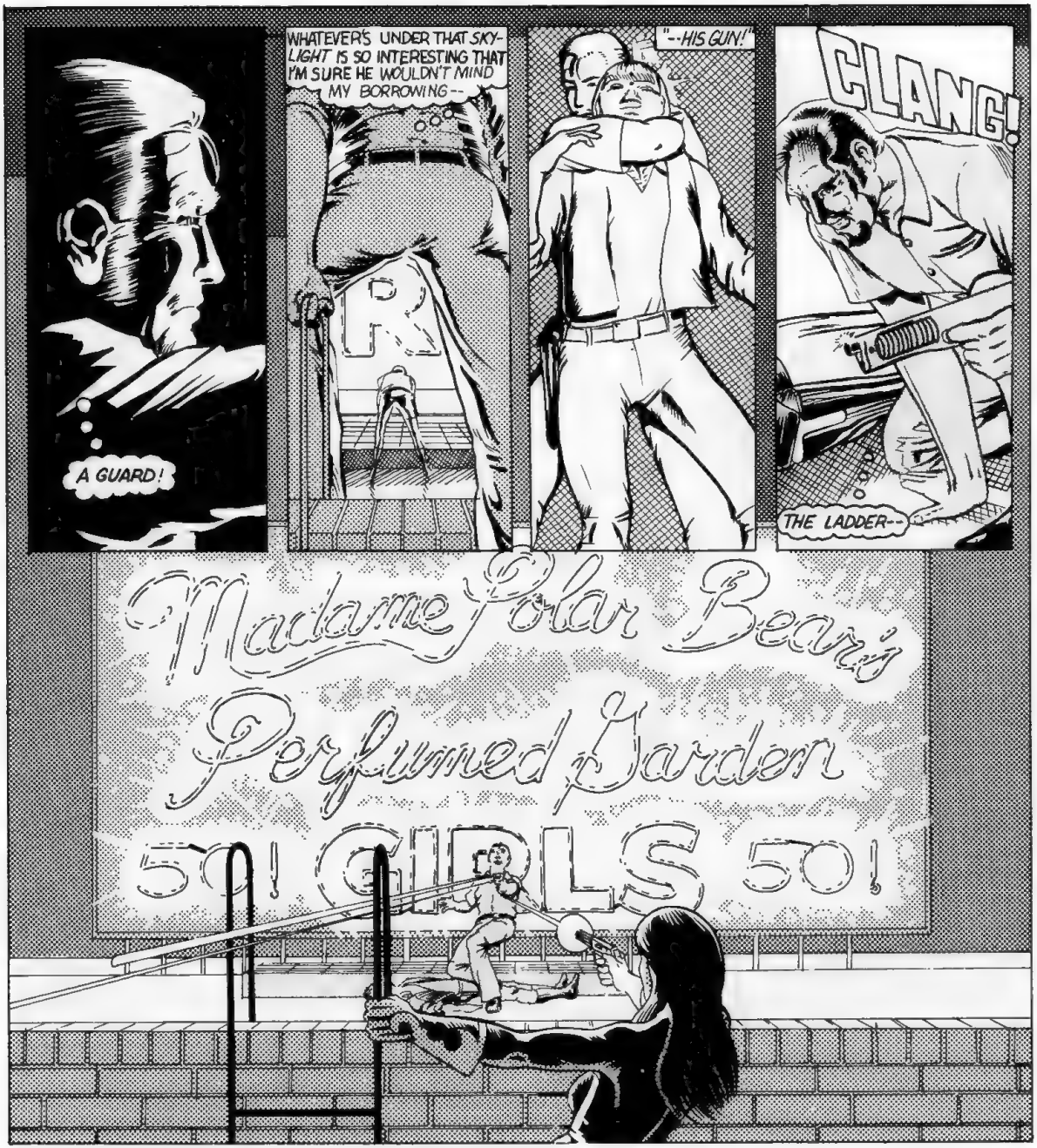
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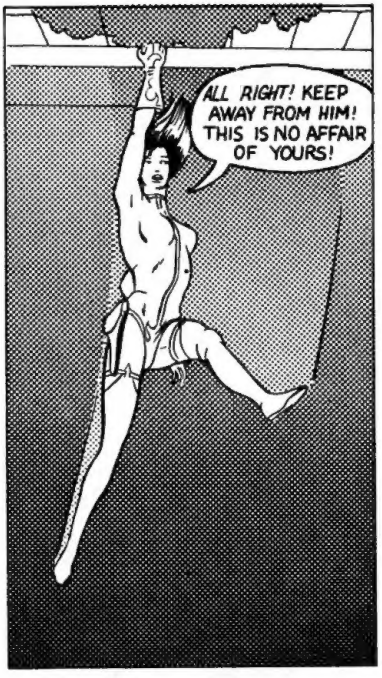
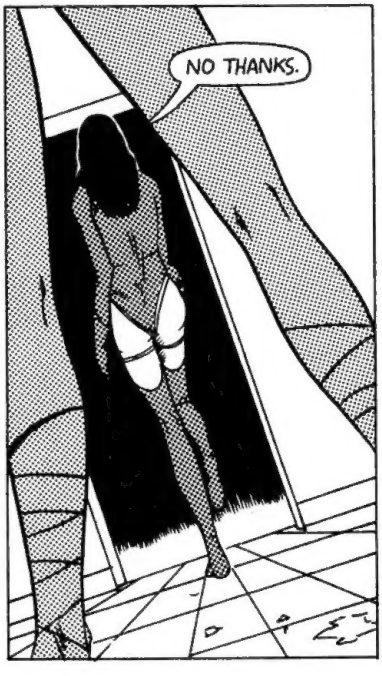

ALL RIGHT! KEEP AWAY FROM HIM! THIS IS NO AFFAIR OF YOURS!

EVEN IF HE CAN'T TALK, THESE PAPERS WILL GIVE ME THE INFORMATION I NEED!

HEY, SISTER. CARE TO...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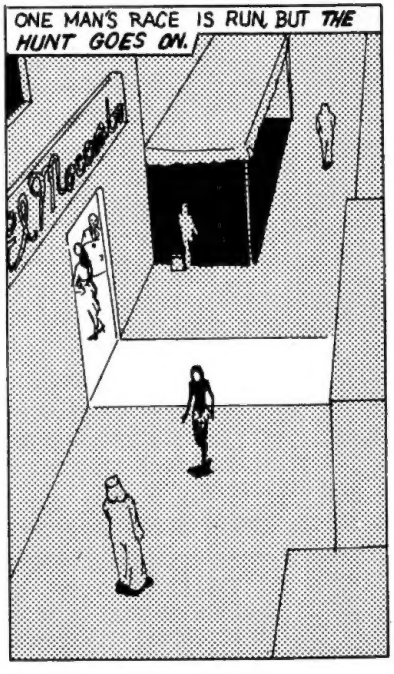
ONE MAN'S RACE IS RUN, BUT THE HUNT GOES ON.

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VW Studios proudly presents the only authorized comics appearance of KANE, Karl Edward Wagner's sorcerous swordsman, in DARK PHANTASMS #1. This 20-page adaptation of Wagner's "In the Lair of Yslsl" is scripted by Bill Whitcomb and illustrated by Steve Vance, Bill Black, and Wes Smith.

This issue also features "The Black Hound of Death," written by Robert E. Howard and illustrated by Stephen Fabian, "Arbada-Fetex," a swashbuckling adventure strip by Wes Smith and Marvel artist Rick Hoberg, covers by Roy G. Krenkel, and more. It's all beautifully printed on 80 pound stock with a coated cover, and costs only $2.50 postpaid. Order now!

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Gary Dolmorn
Publisher

Steve Vance
Editor and Art Director

Bill Whitcomb
Associate Editor

Well, that just about finishes up this issue. We hope you've enjoyed reading it as much as we enjoyed *taking your money* putting it together. Whatever you think about it, though, we would like to hear from you. We're working hard to live up to our chosen name by bringing you not only high quality comic strips and illustrations, but also interviews and articles dealing with various aspects of the graphic story medium, all wrapped up in a visually pleasing package. And when it comes right down to it, only you the reader can tell us whether or not we've succeeded. So let us know, okay?

NEXT ISSUE: You'll get the answers to a few of your questions about Azrael as our mysterious lady in black starts looking for answers herself, in an eight-pager by Steve Vance and Bill Whitcomb.

Bill Black demonstrates that, besides being a top-flight penciller, inker, and editor, he also wields a mean typewriter. Bill's rather bizarre excursion into the realm of science fiction, entitled "Squa Fon!", was illustrated by time-warp victim Craig Russell.

John Byrne and Bob Layton turned out a real beauty for next issue's pull-out poster. We're not going to tell you exactly who their subject is, but we will mention that John and Bob did the art (and an exquisite job it was) on this fella's '78 annual. We might also mention that his hand is pictured on this page.

We can't tell you about all the other features rounding out this 32-page-plus-poster issue, mainly 'cause we're not sure of all of 'em ourselves! Besides, we've got to keep a few surprises in store for you. In any case, our second issue is sure to be another blockbuster. Watch for it!